

VZCZCXYZ0001
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHLM #0162/01 0260910
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 260910Z JAN 07
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5254

C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 000162

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/INS, SCA/PPD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/26/2017
TAGS: [KPAO PHUM CE](#)
SUBJECT: SUPPORTING A BELEAGUERED TAMIL PRESS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr. for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Ambassador and PAO called on beleaguered Tamil dailies "Tinakkural" and Sudar Oli" to demonstrate support for a free press. Ambassador agreed to try to help solve specific problems with their Jaffna editions, in immediate danger of closing due to lack of newsprint and other supplies. Also, conversation revealed Karuna group's sensitivities to how it is portrayed in the press in the east. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On January 24 the Ambassador and PAO paid courtesy calls on the directors and senior editors first of "Tinakkural" and then "Sudar Oli," two Tamil language dailies, to demonstrate the USG's support for a free and unfettered press. While the conversations were off the record, we encouraged both papers to schedule on-the-record interviews with the Ambassador at their convenience and to publish photos of the meetings, which they did the next day.

¶3. (C) Both dailies publish Jaffna editions in Jaffna (for Sudar Oli, for 25 years under the name of "Uttayan"), and both have reported to us as having recently had their shipments of newsprint and other supplies for those editions subsequently and involuntarily off-loaded in Trincomalee from the ship that they had arranged to transport the goods commercially from Trinco to Jaffna, despite having secured permission through the proper channels to include the supplies as "essential goods" for Jaffna. Sudar Oli claims that such an act could only be done at the direct behest of President Rajapaksa himself, though he would employ cutouts to keep his apparent distance. Thinakkural was not so categorical. Both, however, were convinced that the U.S. could successfully intervene on their behalf. Without the shipment, current supplies for both papers in Jaffna will run out and publication will cease within about two weeks, although at least Uttayan is taking various steps to stretch those supplies, including printing fewer copies per day - currently 7,000, down from 20,000 - and possibly going to only three editions per week. The Ambassador agreed to make inquiries on the condition that the papers not report or otherwise talk about his involvement (other than publish the photo of the meeting), as that would only needlessly raise the hackles of nationalist groups who would accuse the Embassy of interference in domestic affairs and make it that much harder for the Mission to be effective in the future.

¶4. (C) These newspapers are widely viewed as not only important means of helping Jaffna residents stay connected with the outside world, and for reporting the news of their own community, but also as small symbols of "normalcy" in an otherwise abnormal situation. There have been reports in recent months that paint a clear picture of efforts to curb unfettered journalism in Jaffna, though exactly by whom has been less clear. This appears to be the first attempt to

choke it off altogether and presented the Mission with an opportunity to demonstrate support.

¶15. (C) The Ambassador subsequently contacted a senior official in President Rajapaksa's office, who agreed to look into the matter.

¶16. (U) In the January 26 edition of the English daily "The Mirror," there appeared a "sitrep" of media and journalism in Jaffna by the Free Media Movement, a local grouping of journalists, publishers and others supporting a free press in Sri Lanka. The report is a long litany of problems facing journalists in Jaffna, from a restrictive curfew and lack of transport, to spotty telecommunications. It includes a brief mention of the lack of newsprint. Interestingly, while there is no mention of the U.S. in the text, the piece includes a captioned photo of the Ambassador's visit to the Sudar Oli office at the bottom. The juxtaposition is clear, as is our message of support.

¶17. (C) On a separate topic, the Tinakkural staff recounted difficulties distributing their Colombo edition in the eastern part of Sri Lanka, where the Karuna group has put pressure on local distributors and newsstand owners to keep the paper off the streets in Trincolmalee and Batticaloa on several occasions over the past few months. They said the main problem is that not only does Karuna want Tinakkural to publish its manifestos, something the paper is reluctantly willing to finesse through op-eds and creative news reporting, but it objects to how it is being portrayed in the paper - particularly to being called a "paramilitary group." Instead, Karuna wants to be known as a political party. Tinakkural had worked out a previous understanding with Karuna and the paper was allowed to be distributed again, only to be blocked when a story mentioning Karuna was reprinted from an international wire service source that again used the "paramilitary" word - local papers will frequently reprint wire service copy without revision, often without even looking very closely at it (as apparently in this case). Tinakkural says that they have again started distribution in the east a few days ago, evidently having found some way to placate the image-conscious Karuna. Interestingly, Sudar Oli does not seem to have similar problems, but that could be because it does not sell as many copies in the east as does Tunakkural, preferring to concentrate on Colombo and Jaffna, where it dominates, though this bears further watching.

BLAKE